Public Memory

Newly appointed mayor Alfred Moore Waddell offered *Collier's Weekly* a first-hand account of the Wilmington Race Riot. His account provided the structure and substance of the collective memory of events for nearly a century. Waddell's story whitewashed the bloodshed and disorder that historians have since associated with the riot. He attributed the disturbance to the leading white Fusionists, among them Governor Daniel L. Russell, "the engineer of all the deviltry and meanness." The "deviltry" to which Waddell referred was the political and economic advancement of African Americans in Wilmington; he declared that whites should restore proper white government in the Port City.

Waddell argued that he had preserved order on November 10, 1898 and prevented the brutal lynchings that had been associated with the South in the 1890s. He described the fire at Alexander Manly's offices as "purely accidental." Commenting that the fire "was unintentional on our part," Waddell argued that white leaders did not intend to destroy private property. He implied that the poor classes of whites who served in Mike Dowling's Red Shirt brigade set the fire. He recalled the speech he gave after the destruction of the *Daily Record* offices, in which he pleaded for order: "[L]et us go quietly to our homes, and about our business, and obey the law, unless we are forced, in self-defense, to do otherwise." In another incident, Waddell recounted a mob's futile attempt to remove seven blacks from the jail and "destroy them." As the newly "elected" mayor, Waddell claimed that he stood for law and order, "stay[ing] up the whole night myself, and the forces stayed up all night, and we saved those wretched creatures' lives." Waddell knew that the image of the South had been tarnished by accounts of lynchings across the region; his essay deflected any comparisons between mob violence and the riot by simply erasing the bloodshed. Instead, he emphasized the ways in which white leaders protected the interests of African Americans. Describing the paternalistic duties of his office for *Collier's Weekly* readers, Waddell recounted visits by two African Americans who requested that he return property (a jack-knife and some cattle) confiscated during the riot. He also mentioned those African Americans who sought "protection against imaginary trouble, and for what I consider would be persecution – that spirit of cruelty that a revolution always develops; people who gratify their animosity and personal spite." Waddell again deflected responsibility for "persecution" upon men of low character who preyed upon the weakness of others. He assured readers that the disorder had subsided and that black Wilmingtonians embraced the new order.[3] The perspective solicited by *Collier's Weekly* appeared, with a few variations, in articles featured in northern newspapers. The Democrats successfully defended their revolution and prevented federal intervention. In the years that followed, David Fulton and Charles Chesnutt attempted to help their readers "remember what they had been taught to forget," namely the facts of the Wilmington Race Riot.[4]

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[3] Alfred Moore Waddell, "The Story of the Wilmington, N.C., Race Riots," *Collier's Weekly*, November 26, 1898, pg. 4-5. In a letter to Edward Oldham, Waddell claimed that he did not write the essay; he merely had "a conversation which Mr. (Charles) Bourke of that paper took down as I talked to him. I think I would have written better than that." Waddell neglected to mention that Bourke lived in Wilmington, and, even if one were to believe his story, Waddell admitted offered a ghostwriter his account of the riot. Letter to Edward Oldham, November 29, 1898, Edward Oldham Papers, Duke University.

[4] Wilson, *Whiteness*, pg. 99.